

## County's adult education classes grapple with cuts in funding

By Marjorie Hernandez

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When Sergio Soriano left his native Mexico City and moved to Thousand Oaks about 20 years ago, he did not speak any English.

The first year was a struggle for Soriano, who worked as a dishwasher at a local restaurant. A former architect student in his country, he said the language barrier was a constant roadblock. That's when he decided to take English as a Second Language courses at Conejo Valley Adult School.

Today, he's a franchise area trainer for 10 Jack in the Box restaurants in Los Angeles, with plans to open his own store. Soriano credits much of his success to the skills he learned at the adult school.

"I knew I could do more, and I was never satisfied washing dishes," Soriano said.

"People who go to adult school are serious and are there to learn. They want to improve their life and give back to the community."

From language and parenting classes to special needs and senior programs, adult education schools provide a variety of courses at low cost throughout the state.

But like many educational programs, adult school budgets have been slashed by about 20 percent over the past two years, California Department of Education officials said.

Three years ago, adult schools received 90 percent of their funding from the state and the rest from the federal government, said Cliff Moss, education programs consultant for the state. Funding for adult education was based on average daily attendance.

In February 2009, however, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation that gave school districts discretion over how to spend state funds for a number of categorical programs, including adult education. This flexibility was given through the 2012-13 school year.

Throughout the state, struggling school districts have used adult education funding to keep their K-12 programs afloat, Moss said.

In Ventura County, adult schools have decreased class hours, cut staffs and teachers, and instituted registration fees. Some plan to suspend some summer classes. The Santa Paula Union High School District closed its program.

Oceanside, Healdsburg Unified, Placentia-Yorba Linda Unified, Redlands Unified and Newport Mesa Unified, among others, also have shut down their programs, Moss said.

"Many of these districts that still have their programs say they expect growth, but the federal funding is just not enough to offset the (total) costs," Moss said.

To better understand how programs have been affected, the state sent surveys to 325

school districts about three weeks ago, Moss said. A total of 171 have responded so far, and results show support staffs, teachers and classes have been most affected by the cuts. Many have reduced the number of hours and classes they are offering even while expecting an influx of new students next year, Moss said.

Santa Paula Superintendent David Gomez said funding to its adult school program was cut by 15 percent to 20 percent over the past three years. The district decided to suspend the program last year and probably will not restart it until 2015, Gomez said.

The cut has affected about 40 students who needed credits to get diplomas. Students have had to seek alternatives, such as taking courses in the Ventura Adult and Continuing Education program, but many had a difficult time finding transportation, Gomez said.

"The Santa Paula community really benefits from the adult education program, but the budget crisis is hitting all of us," Gomez said.

Last month, the Conejo Unified School District board voted to cut \$300,000 in adult education funding, on top of \$500,000 in cuts already made for this school year.

Program administrators said they now have to come up with inventive ways to provide services and classes to their 7,000 students, who take classes at the Waverly and Horizon Hills sites in Thousand Oaks.

"You just have to become more efficient, and the cuts have forced us to use our funds more effectively, but at a certain point, the very things that have helped the community will become affected," said Conejo Valley Adult School Principal Mike Waters.

The decrease in funding means classes like English literacy, which serve about 1,300 students in Conejo will be offered two days a week for 90 minutes instead of the current three days a week for three hours. The cuts also mean no summer sessions for ESL and older adult classes, Waters said.

Depending on Schwarzenegger's revised May budget proposal, districts might have to make additional cuts to adult education programs. Jeffrey Baarstad, Conejo Unified's deputy superintendent, said that could mean an additional \$600,000 in cuts for his district.

"We are hoping the May revise will be better than what they proposed in January," Baarstad said. "We have seen an upward movement in the economy, so we are just waiting to see. You hear stories about people in adult ed who are chasing the American Dream, and we want to maintain that."

Last year, funding for Ventura Adult and Continuing Education was cut by \$1.7 million, said Principal Teresa Johnson. In July 2009, the school had to start charging a \$10 registration fee for classes, and fees for some vocational classes also increased.

Still, both Johnson and Waters said their vocational courses continue to be popular as more people decide to return to school for training in a competitive job market. Fee-based courses like medical billing and phlebotomy continue to grow in popularity because of the low cost compared with private programs, Waters said.

While the Simi Valley Adult School and Career Institute cut its classes and teaching staff by 4 percent and the number of days classes are offered, administrators still expect an enrollment increase of 5 percent to 8 percent, Moss said.

Adult School Principal Judy Perkins said the Oxnard Union High School District board has decided to maintain her program, which serves 10,405 students. Like Conejo, however, Oxnard has cut the number of hours and increased fees for some classes.

"It's frustrating that at a time when people are losing their jobs and want to go back to school, we have the fewest resources to offer them," Perkins said. "They need training to get better jobs and be more competitive. Adult education in California was never adequately funded to begin with, and now, more than ever, there is a greater need."

Soriano is now taking a writing course at the Conejo Valley Adult School.

"People who go to adult school are serious and are there to learn," he said. "People want to learn and want to give back to their community."



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